Neo-Paganism

An Old Religion for a New Age

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As founder and priest of a Neo-Pagan church, I have often been asked to explain exactly what we mean by the term "Pagan". We find ourselves in the peculiar position of having a public image that was created not by ourselves, but by our persecutors. It is much as if the Nazis had succeeded in eradicating Judaism to the extent that, generations later, the common opinion of what the Jewish faith was all about was derived solely from the anti-Semitic propaganda of the Third Reich.

In Europe alone, from tens of thousands to millions (the figures are still in dispute) of Pagans were martyred by the Christian churches during the Inquisition and Witch trials. Those figures do not even count the millions of other Pagan peoples in North and South America, Africa, Polynesia, Melanesia and Asia who fell before the advancing plague of Western Christendom.

Today, the conception most people have of Paganism is the lurid one drawn by the Christian church to justify its own reign of terror, and bears about as much relation to reality as the similar propaganda Christianity once fostered about Jews. In the 13th century the Church opened its long-drawn-out conflict with Paganism in Europe by declaring Witchcraft to be a 'sect' and heretical. It was not till the 14th century that the two religions came to grips.

All through the 16th and 17th centuries the battle raged. The Pagans fought a gallant, though losing, fight against a remorseless and unscrupulous enemy; every inch of the field was disputed. At first victory occasionally inclined to the Pagans, but the Christian policy of obtaining influence over the rulers and law-givers was irresistible. Vae victis was also the policy of the Christians, and we see the priests of the Papacy gloating over the thousands whom they had consigned to the flames while the ministers of the Reformed Churches hounded on the administrators of the law to condemn the 'devil worshipers'.

What can have been the feelings with which those unhappy victims regarded the vaunted God of Love, the Prince of Peace, whose votaries condemned them to torture and death? What wonder that they clung to their old faith, and died in agony unspeakable rather than deny their God. (Margaret Murray, The God of the Witches, 1931, Oxford GB 332, pp. 21-22)

'Pagan' does not mean "irreligious" or "barbarian". It is the correct anthropological term to describe indigenous folk religions, being derived from the Latin paganus, "peasant," which derives in turn from pagus, "village". The Latin comes from the Greek pagos, "standing stone," and paga, "sacred spring," representing, respectively, the male and female generative powers. Paganism is basically Nature worship. 'Pagan' is a proper noun or adjective denoting the name of a religion, and as such, is properly always capitalized, as is 'Jewish' or 'Hindu'.

Religions can be roughly divided into two distinct categories: the naturally evolving, indigenous "folk" religions of particular regions and peoples (the Pagan religions), and on the other hand the "revealed" religions: those religions owing their existence to a "revelation" taught by some great "prophet" and formulated in various creeds and dogmas. The latter category, of course, includes most of the "Great Religions of Mankind:" Judeo-Christian-Islamic, Buddhist, Confucian, etc. Though articulated by a great teacher, Lao-tsu, Taoism is essentially Pagan in philosophy and attitude, while Hinduism and Shinto are Pagan in origin and essence even though they have become institutionalized as State religions.

Pagan religions are characterized by being "natural," both in origin and mode of expression, as opposed to the artificiality of constructed revealed religions. Paganism emerges out of the processes of Life and Nature, and continues to evolve as a living, growing, organic entity.

Revealed religions are like buildings: an architect (prophet) get an inspiration (revelation) and lays down his vision in blueprints (prophecy; scriptures). Then contractors, carpenters, masons, etc. (disciples and followers) build the structure more or less according to his specifications. It is made of non-living materials, and does not grow naturally; it is assembled. When it is finished, it cannot grow further, and begins to deteriorate, until it is eventually so outmoded and rundown it is demolished to make way for new buildings. A world of revealed religions is like unto a city, with all the problems (hunger, war, hatreds, crime, pollution, disease) of a city, and for much the same reason: alienation from the life-flow.

A Pagan religion, on the other hand, is like a tree: it emerges alive from the Earth, grows, changes (both cyclically through the seasons, and continually in upward and outward growth), bears flowers and fruit, and shares its life with other living beings. It is not made or designed according to any blueprint other than genetic. And when, after many thousands of years, perhaps, it should come to the end of its time, it does not pass from the world entirely, for its own progeny have, in the interval, begun to spring up all around, again from the Earth, and again, similar yet each unique. A world of Pagan religions is like a forest.

Paganism includes Animism, Pantheism, Shamanism and Totemism. (Witchcraft is the survival or reconstruction of European Shamanism; i.e., the magical arts of tribal peoples.) Pagan are the native religions of the American Indians, the Africans, the various Island peoples, many peasants in the mountains of Asia, the Aborigines of Australia, and, at one time, the Gauls, Teutons, Norse, Celts and Faeries (as the invading Saxons called the pygmy Neolithic race they encountered in the British Isles). Long before they encountered Christianity, the Faeries (known to archaeologists as Pretani, or Picts) had been forced by the Saxons onto the inhospitable Heaths of Britain, later to be called "Heathens" by the Church. By 1500 CE, they had been virtually exterminated, save for those who managed to intermarry or exchange their infants for those of the invaders ("changelings"). Moreover, as it was later to do in the case of the Witches, who inherited much of the Faery lore and religion, the Church began a campaign to convince the world and future generations that these people had never existed in the first place, but were merely imaginary! The old Pagan religions were never "created". They had no founding prophets and no saviors. They grew up with their people, and their origins are lost in the mists at the dawn of humanity. What little we can trace indicates a descent from Paleolithic and Neolithic "fertility cults," hence the common symbols of the Earth Mother Goddess, the Green Man and the Horned God, the fecund embodiments of living Nature. We find them therefore unanimous in their veneration of Nature and their sensual celebration of life, birth, sex and death as expressed in the seasonal Festivals of the Sacred Year. All these Great Festivals of Paganism, wherever they may be found, correspond in common with the Solstices, Equinoxes, and other natural annual cycles of life (animal mating and birth seasons, planting, harvest).

Most of these remain with us today in more-or-less disguised form as the so-called "Christian" holidays of Christmas (Yule), Easter (Ostara), May Day (Beltane), Thanksgiving (Mabon or Harvest Home), Halloween (Samhain) and even Groundhog's Day (Oimelc). In addition to these six, there are two others, Litha (Midsummer) and Lughnasadh, comprising a total of eight Festivals (or Sabbats, as they are known, sometimes under different names, in Witchcraft). Thus it is obvious that the rich heritage of Paganism forms a solid foundation for the spontaneous emergence of a Neo-Pagan revival today. In the midst of our current spiritual and ecological crisis, it is highly appropriate that natural religions are once again finding a place among the children of Earth.

Modern Neo-Paganism, however, is somewhat distinct from the Old Religion, in that it is to a large measure a relatively new phenomenon. Neo-Pagan religions are many and diverse. They range from the sublimely artistic Paradisal vision and reconstruction of old Pagan Mysteries of Feraferia to the astrological divination and ancient Egyptian religion of the Church of the Eternal Source, and from the Wiccan-oriented myth and ritual of the Pagan Way to the transpersonal psychology, science- fiction mythology and deep ecology of the Church of All Worlds. All of the dozens of Neo-Pagan religions now in existence, and most of the countless sects of Witchcraft, however, do hold certain values in common, and it is these values which relate them to Paganism in the older sense.

One of the key values of Neo-Paganism is its insistence on personal responsibility. The Church of All Worlds expresses this in the phrase, "Thou art God/dess," implying total personal freedom and individual responsibility on the part of every one of us. Paganism has no concept of "original sin," and hence has no need of saviors. Neo-Pagans do not expect Divine retribution for breaking social taboos. Rather, concepts of "sin" and "atonement" are restated in the framework of ecological awareness and karma. If our actions are discordant and in opposition to the evolutionary flow of Life, we suffer the ecological consequences, in much the same way, and for exactly the same reason, as diseased cells in the body are attacked by the antibodies and other natural defenses. Whatever energy we put out returns to us multiplied threefold. Love returns love; hate returns hate. Robert Ingersoll observed: "In Nature there are neither rewards nor punishments; there are consequences". The total responsibility (and hence the total freedom) rests in our hands.

As in the Old Religion, Neo-Pagans conceptualize Divinity as manifest in the processes of Nature. Indeed, in a very literal sense, Mother Nature, Mother Earth, is "Goddess," and She has been recognized as such since time immemorial. Thus ecology is seen as the supreme religious study: "Nature is Divinity made manifest...It is creativity, continuity, balance, beauty and truth of life. "Everything we encounter in the Biosphere is a part of Nature, and ecology reveals the pattern of that is-ness, the natural relationships among all these things and the Organic Unity of all of them as a Biospheric Whole. Thus ecology shows the pattern of man's proper and creative involvement with Nature, that Nature which encompasses his own life and on proper relation to which his survival and development depend: Of all man's secular studies, ecology comes closest to bringing him to the threshold of religious relationship to his world. Ecology not only confirms the wonders of form and function that other secular studies have revealed, but it brings these into organic union with each other as one dynamic, living Whole; and it points out the conditions for the well-being of both this overall Unity and the parts that comprise it.

An intensive realization of these conditions, and of one's own immediate role in their sustainment and development, brings one to the threshold of religious awe. To worship Nature, therefore, is to venerate and commune with Divinity as the dynamically organic perfection of the whole. (Council of Themis, from Green Egg #43)

Neo-Paganism is a recent mutation of the Old Religion which had its earliest emergence during the European Renaissance with the rediscovery of the ancient Greek philosophers via Arabian texts brought by travelers. However, this was also the time of the Burnings, and the budding Neo-Pagan emergence was suppressed until the late 1700's, when it found expression in the Romantic Period of art, music and literature, especially in Germany.

This Romantic flowering of Neo-Paganism, especially the element known as the Bavarian Illuminati (whose mottoes were "eternal flower power" and "eternal serpent power"), greatly appealed to a visiting American named Benjamin Franklin, and upon his return to the colonies, it became a major spiritual force in the post-Revolutionary America of the 1780s, where its influence continued to shape the new nation through the presidencies of the Adams family. It

was Monroe and the War of 1812 that managed to suppress this movement for a time, but it re-emerged 60 years later in the form of the Transcendentalist Movement, exemplified in the poetry and writings of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson, and the overnight mushrooming of the commune movement in the 1840's. The Civil War, Reconstruction, the conquest of the West and the Gold Rush drained the Nature-oriented spiritual energy from the people of America for another 60 years, but it blossomed again through the Art Nouveau movement in the 1900's. Then came the World Wars, the Depression, McCarthyism...60 more years had to pass before the gathering impact of Eastern religious philosophy, especially Zen, and Existentialism gave birth to the "hip" "underground" counter-culture of the Beatniks, whose experimentation with drugs, sexuality, music, poetry, communal living and alternate lifestyles paved the way for the Hippie phenomenon of the 1960's (which spontaneously resurrected the old Illuminati motto of "flower power").

The seeds of Neo-Paganism which had again lain dormant for three generations took root in such fertile soil, and emerged once more into the light, to be joined in the '70s by the heirs of Wicca, the last vestiges of the Old Religion of Europe. The New Religion is still very much Paganism, for its inspiration and orientation today is based, as was that of its predecessors, upon an understanding and relationship of Humanity within the larger perspective of Life, Nature and the Universe. Fred Adams of Feraferia coined the term "eco-psychic" to describe the type of awareness that permeates the New Religion.

Revealed religions, especially of the monotheistic variety, tend to see man as a special creation, exalted above all Nature, and the epitome of God's handiwork. Thus the Biblical injunction to Man to "have dominion over all the Earth" is not seen by Judeo-Christians as outrageously presumptuous; nor is God's destruction of all life on Earth in the legend of the Deluge seen as insanely immoral ecocide. Both God and Man are considered to have a "divine right" to desecrate the Earth at their pleasure. This is in direct opposition to the view of Paganism, which sees humanity's duty not to conquer Nature, but to live in harmony and stewardship with Her. Every revealed religion claims to have its own direct pipeline to the Divinity, and its own essential precepts from direct, unassailable revelation. Neo-Pagans, on the other hand, have outgrown egotistical and temperamental gods, and expect no intervention from some Big Daddy in the Sky to solve the problems of our times. Instead, we look to Nature (through the clear glass of ecology) for inspiration and direction, and to ourselves as the instrumentality for all that needs to be done.

Thou art God/dess!
Otter G'Zell, 1970 (revised Jan. 8, 1991)

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